

Increasing sale of imported 'misbranded' incense sticks harmful

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AHMEDABAD: The rainy season brings along a series of challenges – water clogging, dampness, mosquito infestation particularly in unclean sewages, chawls (slums). Incense sticks or 'agarbattis', a commonly known pooja related item used for worship or as a low cost room freshener for aromatic purposes, is now raising a fire and smoke in the country.

During a parliamentary discussion, a cause was taken up through a special mention by Congress MP Hussain Dalwai during April 2015. It has come to public knowledge that incense sticks are being imported from China pre-smeared with harmful chemicals and repacked in India. They come under various brand names, claiming to be natural in being effective for driving away

mosquitoes and are available to the uninformed consumers from small pan beedi or tea shops at the roadside in almost all parts of the country more so in Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Telengana, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal.

Case in point is Balaji Incense Sticks, Bengaluru who have recently launched a new product called 'Balaji Relax Citronella Incense Sticks' and various other unorganised/fringe players similar to them having brand names of 'SleepWell', 'King', 'Killer', 'Tapsi' and 'Relief'. All such brands of incense stick (agarbattis) players either make claims, on the package, of including Citronella (commonly known as Lemon grass) in the agarbattis to 'keep

mosquitoes away'. Some product packaging have images of green grass and/or natural plants.

A laboratory test, conducted by Bombay Textile Research Association (BTRA) on few of the products - Balaji Relax Citronella Incense Sticks and Ashika's SleepWell Citronella Incense stick - has found that there is no presence of Citronella in the incense stick (agarbattis) but that of a non-registered toxic carbamate pesticide 'Fenobucarb', a toxic pesticide.

Commenting on this situation, Secretary Home Insect Control Association (HICA), said, "One of the key responsibilities of HICA is to educate consumers about health and safety in the context of household insecticides. Our members have recently brought to our attention that a number of misleadingly branded incense sticks are being manufactured and sold across the country under the brand names of Sleep Well, Balaji Relax, Killer and Relief, among others. We have conducted lab tests on these products and the results confirm that there is no trace of Citronella (a natural insect repellent) in them. We have found that they contain a non-registered pesticide called Fenobucarb. This is being used without obtaining a prior license from the Central Insecticide Board."

Fenobucarb is a lethal pesticide, which is being phased out of use globally, including in India. Inhaling Fenobucarb laced smoke from all such agarbattis may cause various health complications, such as irritation in the eyes and skin, dizziness, excessive sweating, central nervous system depression and abdominal pain. Overexposure to the chemical can also lead to nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting, headache, runny nose, watery eyes, bronchospasm, and difficulty in breathing, wheezing, a slower or faster heart rate and seizures.

Fenobucarb, in the case of Balaji Relax Citronella Incense Sticks', is probably being used as an ingredient without obtaining a prior license for manufacture of such incense stick with insecticide, which is a prerequisite to be obtained from the Registration Committee of Central Insecticide Board. Furthermore the company – Balaji Incense Sticks and Ashika's SleepWell incense Stick – doesn't even mention various mandates required in accordance with Legal Metrology Act, 2009.

The agarbatti industry in India is a labour-intensive cottage industry. By importing such Chinese products laced with insecticides and unleashing unapproved products of 'misbranded insecticides' being passed off as 'agarbattis', small players of agarbatti companies such as Balaji Relax are giving a go-by to public health concerns and insecticide regulatory regime in India, besides leaving thousands of rural folks jobless and depriving the government also, its legitimate share of taxes.